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DE RUEHDE #0236/01 1741209
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P R 221209Z JUN 08
FM AMCONSUL DUBAI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6031
INFO RHEHAAA/NSC WASHINGTON DC
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES
RUEHQQ/NEA AREA MSG COLLECTIVE FROM NICOSIA
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA 0078
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0017
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 0358
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0306
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 0292
RUEHSW/AMEMBASSY BERN 0086
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 0011
RUEHAD/AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI 3069
RUEHDE/AMCONSUL DUBAI 9232

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 05 DUBAI 000236

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KMPI](#) [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: G8-BMENA SUBMINISTERIAL READOUT

DUBAI 00000236 001.2 OF 005

1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor David Kramer led the U.S. delegation to the Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) subministerial meeting in Dubai on June 9, 2008. NEA DAS Kent Patton and DRL DAS Erica Barks-Ruggles were part of the delegation. The event included 24 civil society activists and focused on themes of political reform, sustainable development, and a review of G8-BMENA initiatives. The success of this second subministerial should institutionalize a structure that began in Berlin in 2007 and allows for more in-depth discussions among civil society groups and G8 and BMENA governments on critical issues of reform. End Summary

POLITICAL REFORM SESSION

2. (SBU) In the first civil society thematic intervention, Mohammed Al Mekhlafi of the Yemeni Observatory for Human Rights provided an overview of freedom of expression in the region. While most states have constitutions that protect freedom of expression, they nonetheless restrict this freedom in their laws. Examples include the Emergency Law in Egypt, complicated press licensing procedures, controls both before and after publication, restriction on access to information, and unclear regulations that can lead to criminal prosecution. Mekhlafi noted that Yemen does not restrict publication by political parties. Government commentator Raouf Saad of Egypt responded that civil society had adopted the "usual list of remarks on difficulties they meet" and that he hoped for a partnership with civil society, not complaints from them. He said that freedom of expression is a basic right that cannot be given or taken away, and that it is a good yardstick of reform. National legislation is a starting point for partnerships between governments and NGOs. Saad cited statistics on the expansion of press outlets in Egypt since 1982.

3. (SBU) Mekhlafi's presentation on the legal environment for civil society recommended abolishment of (a) licensing

requirements for journals, (b) administrative controls over the press, and (c) criminalization of NGO formation. Civil society should have the right to foreign funding but also must have transparent finances. Government commentator Yousuf Amrani of Morocco said governments need to deepen their partnerships with NGOs and create the necessary legal environment. Noting that NGOs have helped consolidate reforms in Morocco, he called on all countries to ratify the relevant international agreements and agreed that NGOs must be transparent.

14. (SBU) Lamis Nasser of the Women's Forum for Human Rights (Jordan) spoke on public participation and women's empowerment, citing awareness, capability, and knowledge as the three goals for women's participation. She noted some recent advances, including political rights for women in Kuwait and municipal elections in Jordan in which women won seats. However, social norms and civil status laws enhance discrimination against women. Nasser noted that a proposed gender institute had been supported by some governments at the 2007 BMENA subministerial in Berlin, and that a feasibility study is underway and will be presented to governments at this year's Forum for the Future Ministerial. Commentator Wadouda Badran of the Arab Women Organization cited poverty and cultural norms as challenges for women and described the activities of her organization, which is affiliated with the Arab League.

15. (SBU) During the discussion session, A/S Kramer applauded the courageous and determined work by both civil society and governments on reform efforts in the Middle East. The role played by indigenous civil society actors is critical, and this sector needs to have a protected, legal space in which to

DUBAI 00000236 002.2 OF 005

operate and prosper. He welcomed the comments made by the speakers on freedom of expression, noting that freedom of expression and opinion is a right that is still denied in too many places. A/S Kramer welcomed the comments by Lamis Nasser on women's empowerment, citing that equality for women is a key foreign policy priority for the United States. He recognized the work being done by both governments and civil society to empower and promote opportunities for women, and applauded the work being done by our NGO partners on the gender institute study. He noted that the BMENA region would greatly benefit from such projects, and noted that the U.S. delegation looked forward to reading the assessment study at this year's Forum Ministerial.

16. (SBU) Abdullah Al Darazi of the Bahrain Society for Human Rights said that problems lie in the implementation of laws applying to civil society and noted that Bahrain had amended laws to stop the imprisonment of journalists. Saad Eddin Ibrahim of the Ibn Khaldun Center in Egypt agreed that the laws on freedom of expression are good. Citing Egypt as an example, he said that the problem is "freedom after expression." He said an Egyptian girl had been detained for calling for a peaceful strike, that bloggers have been harassed, and that he was in exile for expressing his views. He noted that the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women in the Arab region is the lowest in the world, and asked that the subministerial recommend to the Forum that the gender institute be established. Amal Basha of Sisters Arab Forum (Yemen) warned of a draft Yemeni law that would criminalize journalists who expose corruption, and Rana Ghanem of the Social and Democratic Forum (Yemen) discussed a journalist who had been under arrest for six years. Ebtisam Al Kitbi of UAE University said that her country's legal environment is very restricted; for example, civil society activists cannot attend events abroad without permission from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Reza Eslami of Shadid Beheshti University (Iran) called on governments to ease restrictions on academic freedom and stop filtering blogs and other websites.

UAE civil society activist Reem Obeidat said that simply counting the number of media outlets does not give an accurate reflection of freedom of expression as many news outlets are state owned or influenced. She also said that NGO licensing leads to monitoring. Bakhtiar Amin of the International Alliance for Justice (Iraq) suggested a center on pluralism and called on oil-producing countries to create a fund to fight poverty and promote education.

17. (SBU) Syrian delegate Rustom Al Zuabi said he was disappointed that civil society did not highlight more positive aspects of reform. He noted the number of women in the Syrian government and complained about "the suffering of people in the Golan Heights and Palestinian territories." He said that the Israeli occupation is not an excuse for lagging in reforms, but that it leads Arab countries to allocate more funds to defense. The Kuwaiti and Emirati delegates cited legal reforms that civil society did not mention, and Sheikh Walad Bu Asriya of Mauritania praised the good press and NGO laws in his country. Mauritania has over 1000 NGOs, most led by women, he said.

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT SESSION

18. (SBU) The first portion of the Sustainable Development session focused on education reform. Hoda Chalak of the Civil Society Initiative (Lebanon) said that education should be free and compulsory and should train minds in a scientific way. Youth unemployment contributes to violence and migration among youth. Mohzen Marzouk of the Arab Democracy Foundation called for curriculum to enhance democracy and nationalism. Specialized organizations should participate in the Forum, and foreign ministers should communicate with other ministers in their government to strengthen collaboration on reform. Egypt's

DUBAI 00000236 003.2 OF 005

Raouf Saad said the Forum should deliver real products and cited as an example an Egyptian program that links education to the labor market. German BMENA coordinator Renate Schimkoreit noted the example in East Germany of unemployment leading to right-wing radicalization. Amrani of Morocco outlined three goals: literacy, curriculum reform leading to openness toward other cultures, and education for economic growth.

19. (SBU) The second portion of the session was devoted to cooperation among governments, civil society, and the private sector. Jihad Moheidat gave a presentation on the Abu Dhabi Future Energy Company. The UK Ambassador to the UAE said that climate change will lead to more competition for resources in the region. He and the representative of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization discussed the food crisis, which Ziad Abdusamad of the Arab Network for NGOs (Lebanon) said was the result of three decades of failed agriculture policy. Russian BMENA coordinator Gennady Tarasov said that regional governments would have to increase their food production. Mohamed Yuser Barnia of the Arab Monetary Fund and Ali Al Kaaby of the UAE Red Crescent Society outlined government responses to the crisis. Canadian government representative Jim Stone said that NGOs are necessary to deliver humanitarian aid, that governments have a role in bringing G8 and BMENA NGOs together, and that governments need to abide by their own laws when dealing with NGOs. The Palestinian representative spoke about the peace process and said that while a detained Yemeni journalist is a problem, what about 11,000 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel? Mauritania described a new initiative to support

professionalism in civil society organizations.

REVIEW OF G8-BMENA INITIATIVES

¶10. (SBU) Session moderator Mensur Akgun of the Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation (TESEV) said that a civil society meeting in Istanbul on May 10 had made several recommendations for G8 and BMENA governments: funds should be earmarked to sustain civil society participation in BMENA activities, political parties should be included, recommendations from the Sana'a parallel civil society forum should be presented to the 2008 Forum for the Future, the G8 should prepare a stocktaking report on reform, and civil society should be included in preparations for the Forum. Ezzedine Al Asbahy of the Human Rights Information and Training Center (HRITC, Yemen) echoed the call for taking stock of what has been achieved under BMENA and what the vision for the future should be, including a practical plan and timetable. He called for a secretariat to maintain continuity and build partnerships with civil society and the private sector and for an annual evaluation of democracy in the region. Saad Eddin Ibrahim said that according to various indicators, the region is going backward in terms of peace and development. He raised the issue of continuity, given G8 government changes, and called for a gender institute, a center on the management of diversity, and a council for human security.

¶11. (SBU) Foundation for the Future Executive President Nabila Hamza said that her organization was a response to an appeal from civil society for a mechanism to support their efforts. After focusing on developing its board and staff, the Foundation has now issued 24 grants worth \$6.6 million to support civil society institutions. The Foundation will focus next on additional grants it is currently considering, expanding existing grants, and moving into new countries. She thanked donors for their contributions and asked for funding from more Arab countries and international organizations. Hamza offered the Foundation's assistance to coordinate civil society's efforts under BMENA and to mobilize even more groups.

DUBAI 00000236 004.2 OF 005

¶12. (SBU) Niccolo Figa-Talamanca presented the set of principles entitled "Toward a More Effective Partnership Between G8-BMENA and Civil Society," which had originally been circulated at the first BMENA subministerial in Berlin in October 2007. He noted that it was a joint government-civil society product developed through the Democracy Assistance Dialogue (DAD), with constructive input from governments and civil society. The document does not create new principles, but consolidates language from various pre-existing documents in a way that makes it easier to assess progress against certain standards. He noted that the DAD wants to send this document to the Ministerial and asked for any additional comments by the end of July.

¶13. (SBU) In his main intervention, A/S Kramer applauded the DAD civil society and the governments of Yemen, Italy, and Turkey for their continued focus on advancing and regularizing dialogue between civil society and governments. Citing a recent article in Foreign Affairs by Secretary Rice, he stated that the U.S. "recognizes that democratic state building is now an urgent

component of our national interest, and that in the broader Middle East, we recognize that freedom and democracy are the only ideas that can, over time, lead to just and lasting stability." A/S Kramer said that the initiatives launched under BMENA are valuable tools to build support for reform at governmental and grass-roots levels, and that the United States will continue to work with our partners to expand liberty and build strong institutions. He thanked Niccolo Figa-Talamanca and other DAD partners for their comments on the NGO principles, and commended the DAD for taking on this initiative. While expressing the U.S. endorsement of these principles, he hoped that with this latest initiative the integral work in promoting freedom, democracy, and human rights reform in the BMENA region will continue and that all ministers will offer their support for the principles at this year's Forum. He applauded the leadership of UAE and Japan in their roles as co-hosts for this year's Forum in Abu Dhabi, and noted that Secretary Rice looks forward to attending this year's ministerial. A/S Kramer reassured those assembled that no matter which candidate wins our upcoming presidential elections, the United States will stay firmly committed to BMENA. [Note: A/S Kramer's full remarks can be found on the DRL intranet website.]

¶14. (SBU) Italian BMENA coordinator Antonella Uneddu noted the blossoming of activities and said that the guiding principles can represent an important contribution. Italy is committed to the 2009 Forum for the Future and will coordinate closely with Japan and the UAE. Bahraini Assistant Under Secretary Shaikh Abdulaziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa voiced concern about momentum lost after the 2007 Forum was cancelled, and noted that the BMENA Entrepreneurship Center in Bahrain was funded only by the U.S. and UK. Bahrain has suspended its center due to lack of G8 commitment. He noted Bahrain's efforts on women's empowerment but said that Bahrain had not been as successful as hoped. His deputy Dhafer Alumran later said that "we're more excited, the more constructive criticism we hear" from civil society. He called on the G8 to establish a small electronic BMENA secretariat and said that the guiding principles are worthwhile because governments and civil society must commit themselves together. He asked the Foundation to provide more detailed information to donors at the Forum.

¶15. (SBU) In a forceful intervention, Amal Basha of Sisters Arab Forum said that NGOs had been excited about the prospect of partnership with governments and they took seriously their responsibility to be a voice for the region's civil society. The NGOs are not present to embarrass anyone or to adorn the meetings, but to present real concerns that governments should take seriously. If governments only want civil society as symbolic partners, it is not worth civil society's participation, and she ironically commended those Arab governments that do not participate in BMENA because at least they are honest in rejecting democratic change.

DUBAI 00000236 005.2 OF 005

¶16. (SBU) Yemeni MFA representative Mohy Al-Dhabbi commended civil society's seriousness and objectivity, but said that positive developments must also be recognized. Amrani of Morocco supported the principles as a roadmap for future work. He called for more than dialogue, but rather projects that deal with economic and educational development in addition to political reform. He noted that the public is watching governments' actions.

COMMENT

¶17. (SBU) The BMENA subministerial was successful in bringing together governments and civil society in a mostly constructive atmosphere free of personal attacks. Although some governments took umbrage at the deficiencies pointed out by civil society presenters in the political reform session, most of the discussion focused on the need for concrete achievements to maintain momentum and show civil society organizations and the general public that BMENA remains relevant and is achieving results. The public support of the guiding principles by several G8 and BMENA governments is an important step toward endorsement by foreign ministers at the Forum in October, one of our main goals for this year. Addressing a commonly heard concern, the U.S. delegation stressed both in plenary session and in side conversations that U.S. support for BMENA will almost certainly continue after the new Administration takes office. The success of this second subministerial should institutionalize a structure that began in Berlin in 2007 and allows for more in-depth discussions among civil society groups and G8 and BMENA governments on critical issues of reform.

SUTPHIN